

New Study:

National Character, Stereotypes, and Culture

Terracciano A. et al. 2005.

“National Character Does Not Reflect Mean Personality Trait Levels in 49 Cultures.” *Science* 310:96-100

Most people hold beliefs about personality characteristics typical of members of their own and others' cultures. These perceptions of national character may be generalizations from personal experience, stereotypes with a "kernel of truth," or inaccurate stereotypes. We obtained national character ratings of 3989 people from 49 cultures and compared them with the average personality scores of culture members assessed by observer ratings and self-reports. National character ratings were reliable but did not converge with assessed traits. Perceptions of national character thus appear to be unfounded stereotypes that may serve the function of maintaining a national identity.

Upon reading the introduction, the point of the paper actually seems to be very minor. They cite a number of earlier works to the effect that human populations actually do differ in the frequencies of different personality types (e.g. extrovert/introvert, etc.). And they claim that the mix of personality types may correlate with "culture-level variables such as individualism-collectivism".

So what they have examined is whether the actual mix of personality traits in a country *matches* the stereotypes people hold about their own country itself. If these do in fact match, then the "aggregate personality data" from a population ought to indicate the same values as reported by people from the population themselves. The study claims that this correspondence is true for gender stereotypes:

For example, gender stereotypes depicting women as warm and men as assertive are widely held around the world. Crosscultural studies using both self-reports and observer ratings have shown that women in fact score higher on measures of warmth, whereas men score higher on measures of assertiveness. Assessed gender differences are small but are largely consistent with gender stereotypes, so those views appear to have a basis in the characteristics of individuals.

In contrast, the study found that stereotypes that people hold about their "national character" don't correspond to the actual mix of personalities in their populations.

Perceptions of national character are not generalizations about personality traits based on accumulated observations of the people with whom one lives; instead, they appear to be social constructions that may serve different functions altogether. ... Whatever their origins, stereotypes may be perpetuated by information-processing biases in attention/perception, encoding, and integration of information. They become cultural phenomena, transmitted through media, hearsay, education, history, and jokes.